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ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of oral history interviews, this paper examines the events and consciousness surrounding a 1979 strike initiated by 53 female office employees of the Wisconsin Education Association (WEA) Insurance Trust. Faced with sex-discriminatory working conditions, the women at the Trust responded by initiating a strike. For many of the women, the strike was extremely stressful, requiring that single mothers risk financial hardship, that some married women challenge traditional power relationships with their husbands, and that all women confront conventional expectations about proper feminine behavior. Although the strike received little publicity and support from other labor unions, supportive comments in a speech directed to the WEA by Jane Fonda resulted in more publicity, increased support, and confirmation that the strike was a legitimate action. Despite the elimination of the salary schedule, the strike resulted in gains in the area of improved grievance language and strong union input into work rules. In the estimation of many of the Trust women, they had won the strike. By enabling the women to challenge the restrictions of work and family, the strike resulted for many in changes of consciousness including greater self-confidence, outspokenness, and independence. Although some ambivalence was expressed over support for the labor movement in general, for many, the process of striking led to the solidification of women's relationships, a growth in critical consciousness, and a greater identification with feminist issues and working women. (LH)

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WORKING WOMEN'S CONSCIOUSNESS: TRADITIONAL OR OPPOSITIONAL?

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WORKING WOMEN'S CONSCIOUSNESS: TRADITIONAL OR OPPOSITIONAL?

Recent historical research has focused long overdue attention on the combined impact of class and gender on working women's actions and consciousness. Tilly's study of nineteenth century working women in the cotton, textile, and tobacco industries of France demonstrates that the household division of labor was a critical factor in determining women's participation in collective action.[1] Dublin's research on nineteenth century Yankee mill girls shows that it was the combination of the patriarchal farm background and the new social relations in which the mill girls found themselves--both in the mills and in the boarding houses--which provided the basis for the mill girls' participation in the Ten Hour Movement and the Female Reform Association.[2] And Sarah Eisenstein's study of turn-of-the-century working class women demonstrates that working women's consciousness was contradictory, forged out of their critical negotiation with both the dominant Victorian ideology and the alternative feminist ideology of the period.[3]

This paper examines the interplay between class and gender in the lives of contemporary working women. Based on oral history interviews, the analysis highlights the contradictory character of collective action for 53 office workers who initiated a strike action against their employer in September of 1979.[4] Caught between their work and family identities, between an older notion of themselves as nonconfrontative and a newer notion of themselves as entitled to certain rights at work and at home, these women responded to sex-discriminatory working conditions by initiating a strike.

By enabling the women to challenge the conventions and restrictions of their everyday lives, the strike resulted for most of the women in a transformation in their consciousness as working women. And for many, the strike reverberated well past its conclusions, influencing the women's feelings about their employer, other workers, their families, and themselves.

Work at the Trust

The office workers were employees of the Wisconsin Education Association Insurance Trust (the Trust), an insurance company founded in 1970 by the Wisconsin Education Association (WEA) to provide insurance coverage to school system employees. As the arm of the largest union in the state, the Trust was an unusual type of insurance company. Appointed by WEA, the Board of Trustees for the Trust were mostly former teachers. The fact that the Trust management reported to a union-appointed Board of Directors prevented them from implementing blatantly anti-union policies. At the same time, however, the Trust's status as an "arm of a union" did not protect the company from competitive pressures. Constrained to function competitively according to insurance industry standards (or else WEA would switch to a major carrier), the Trust organized its work process according to a traditional, patriarchal hierarchy and managerial mentality.

In the first ten years of operation, the two male managers at the Trust set policies and directed the work of the five female claims adjustors who performed the entire range of manual tasks involved in claims adjusting: opening the mail, setting up the file for the insured, deciding on the claims payment, and typing the insurance checks. In 1975, two female supervisors were hired to deal with the "communication problems" which had developed between management and non-management employees. This move was not particularly successful. That same

year, the non-management employees decided to join the United Staff Union, the state local of the National Staff Organization, an independent union representing employees of teacher's unions.

During the term of the first union contract--from the fall of 1975 until the fall of 1977--the Trust grew significantly, adding new benefit plans to existing teacher contracts. Management responded to growth by hiring twenty additional employees, by expanding the managerial hierarchy, by rationalizing the claims process, and by moving its employees to two separate locations. The Billing, Accounting, and Data Processing Departments were located in one building. The Claims and Clerical Departments were housed in a second building, along with the two top managers. Responsible for the allocation of tasks and the monitoring of employee performance, the department managers and supervisors cast a decisive influence over the tenor of office relationships. In the first building, managers fostered a work atmosphere which granted significant autonomy to union employees, encouraging casual, friendly interactions both during and after work hours. Satisfaction with working conditions in these departments was therefore greater than in the Claims and Clerical Departments where supervisors closely monitored the work of their subordinates, discouraging even work-related conversations.

The geographical separation between the two buildings posed a barrier to communication among the Trust women, causing problems as the union entered its second negotiation in the fall of 1977. The union bargaining team was dissatisfied with the management proposal for a reduction in leave time and wages. They also resented the attitude of the management negotiator who, as bargaining team members recalled, justified the low wage proposal as

'sufficient for secondary wage-earners working for pin money.'[5] The union bargaining team recommended that its membership reject the contract and consider a strike. But in the absence of strong inter-departmental ties and a shared assessment that working conditions were unacceptable, the Trust women could not reach a consensus. They voted against a strike. Weakened by the vote, the union negotiators accepted the contract.

Six months later, the Trust management moved their forty union employees to a new building. With the move came new sex-disciminatory work rules which clearly demarcated the rights of male managers from the rights of female employees. Management installed a time clock, followed by individual and group reprimands for as little as one-minute tardiness; directed the union employees to use the side door and the stairway, reserving the front door and the elevator for themselves; and instituted a rigid schedule, requiring the women to take staggered breaks and lunches by department. To separate the women within departments, management erected carrels.

For many of the women, the sex-discriminatory work rules became a symbol that management was trying to establish two classes of employees at the Trust: male managers and female employees. Their comments described the male managers as a privileged caste who looked down on their subordinates as "uneducated" and "secondary" wage-earners. As one woman put it,

> The attitude that there were two classes of people started at the top and filtered down...the elevator, the fact that management had two Christmas parties [one for themselves and one for the women]...all these things added up to a sharp division between management and union.

The educational backgrounds of the Trust women varied: All had high-school degrees, 30% had finished some college, and 11% had college degrees. Two of the women were registered nurses. Many of those without

a formal education had acquired technical skills working in medical and dental offices. Others learned these skills on the job. Particularly for the claims adjustors whose jobs required interpreting x-rays and making decisions about complex insurance claims, management's statements alluding to their "replaceability" were insulting.

In the year leading up to the strike, several incidents heightened the Trust women's frustration with managerial policies and attitudes: Management denied leave time to a union steward who asked to visit her dying father; suspended a second woman with two children for leaving in the middle of a snowstorm; and denied leave without pay to a third woman who needed to visit her asthmatic daughter in the hospital, stating (as several women recalled) that 'women who have responsiblities for their children should stay home like our wives do.' These incidents struck the Trust women as bitterly ironic. When management needed to legitimate their low wages or lack of promotional opportunities, they defined the union women as "mothers" and "wives." But when the women requested leave time to fulfill their family responsibilities, management denied their requests. For many of the Trust women, these managerial attitudes reflected "that the Trust employees were all women and upper management all men...These men had no sympathy for working mothers and wives."

A common understanding of the problems at the Trust began to emerge as the union women prepared for the 1979 bargain. The union formed committees in anticipation of bargaining and selected eight women for the bargaining team. After coming up with the motto, "WEA'RE WORTH IT!" (a reference to their employer, WEA), the union ordered t-shirts and buttons which all the women wore on bargaining days. And to transmit reports about the

upcoming negotiations, the bargaining team printed a newsletter, "As the Trust Turns." Through both serious and humorous articles, the newsletter communicated information across departments, validating the union women's right to "stand up to management."

With the commencement of negotiations on August 1, management's bargaining behavior played a central role in, as one woman stated, "feeding the discontent of the women and helping to foster unity." Management's contract offer included an elimination of the salary schedule (which guaranteed semi-annual raises), a reduction in leave time, and an elimination of seniority rights for layoffs. The union's proposal called for expanded fringe benefits, union input into work rules, and language clarification. Through newletter articles, bargaining team members communicated to their coworkers the conflicts and differences which developed at the bargaining table. A central theme was management insensitivity to the "needs" of working women:

> [Management has] no empathy or even insight into the problems that we, as women, face when combining jobs and homemaking. And they seem to tie in this lack of empathy with the fact that we are all 'clerical' workers. If ignorance is bliss, they are damn tranquil!! Regardless of the job title--be it teacher or clerical worker--women do have distinct problems which need attention and addressing in a contract!!

Also controversial was management's propoal for salaries

> Management suggests TAKING AWAY salary increments!...We were reminded by management that we were not negotiating a teacher's contract. We do not have an identity problem; We know we're not teachers, but we're not second class citizens, either!!

and for union input into work rules (such as access to the elevator and the front door):

> Management seems reluctant to include certain employee rights as part of the contract. WE disagree. Second only to monetary gain, human rights and principles are sacred issues!!!

Union meetings became a central vehicle through which clerical strategies were forged. Before the bargaining began, few of the Trust women had attended General Membership meetings with any regularity. In principal, these meetings were designed to address the interests of the three bargaining units of the United Staff Union--the professional staff (the lawyers who bargained teacher contracts for the WEA), the clerical support staff for the professionals, and the women who worked for the Trust. In practice, the priorities of the mostly male professional staff usually took precedence. In numbers, the professional staff constituted the smallest bargaining unit: The membership of the USU included 25 professionals, 25 support staff, and 53 Trust women. Partly because they felt that the male professionals looked down on them as "only clericals", the Trust women stayed away from General Membership meetings. But the union meetings for the Trust bargaining unit were different. Most of the clericals described these meetings as spirited, well-run, and democratic. Many underscored that "their" union meetings contributed to Trust-wide discussions of working conditions and feelings of solidarity.

As the September deadline for the expiration of the 1977 contract approached, management and union reached a stalemate. The Trust women reported that the management team refused to sit across the table from the union women, negotiating instead with the male union representatives. For many of the Trust women, this behavior underscored management's lack of respect for the union woman: "Management had no respect for the union women, simply because they were women."

In carpools on the way to work and by phone at night, the Trust women talked increasingly about the impasse in bargaining and how a strike might affect their work and family lives. Some felt excited about the

challenges of a strike. Others worried what a picket line might require:

> I had no idea what a strike would be like. I disliked the idea of a strike immensely. I didn't feel I wanted to quit though. I felt I could go along with a strike.

Some felt confident that their families could accomodate a strike. But for others, their family situations provoked anxiety, "The anticipation of the strike made me nervous because we were expecting a baby and I was trying to get the bills out of the way."

On September 14, the Trust management issued production standards for the claims adjustors, stating that a failure to meet them would result in discharge, and instructed supervisors to more closely monitor the actions of their subordinates. The union newsletter reported that the Trust management had "joined the ranks of the Ayatollah Khomeni." Some of the union women reacted by slowing down their work. Others openly discussed plans for a strike in front of their supervisors. On the friday afternoon before the strike vote, the union women packed up and removed all their personal and work-related materials from their carrels.

Two nights later, all fifty-three women gathered at the Sheraton Hotel. Unknown to the Trust women, the two male negotiators for the union team agreed that evening to accept management's outstanding bargaining proposal. When the union women found out, they were furious. It was not their understanding that the male negotiators had the power to accept a contract offer without the women's approval. The Trust women decided to go ahead with the strike vote. One of the bargaining team members described the results:

> We decided to tally out loud how many 'yeses' and how many 'nos' as far as the strike vote was concerned. It kept going yes, yes, YES!! I get goosebumps just thinking about it now. And after it was all counted, everybody just cheered and hugged each other. There was a mixture of happiness and 'I'm scared to death' in the room.

The Strike

Carrying picket signs made the night before, all the union women gathered at dawn on October 1 for a mass rally. The Administrators called off work for the day. With the target of their protest absent, the Trust women had time to organize into picket shifts and plan for the days ahead.

The women felt confident that their strike action would result in gains. Most assumed that, without the claims adjustors, clericals, and billing clerks, the Trust would be unable to "conduct business as usual." But management had prepared for the strike also. For several weeks preceding the strike, computer programmers wrote programs to short-step the claims process. Eliminating the steps normally taken by adjustors to validate procedures and payments, Trust management set up a "fast-track" system for processing claims. While many errors were made, this system allowed the managers and supervisors to perform the bulk of the work normally processed by union employees.

Unaware of management's initiatives, the union women experienced the first weeks of the strike as an exciting and empowering time, a time when norms were suspended and new behaviors encouraged. In the first week, confrontations with management were mostly verbal. Well-liked supervisors were given preferential treatment. But managers and supervisors who had harassed union women found themselves the object of insults and ridicule. Freed from the constraints of the workplace hierarchy, the women recalled that the strike provided opportunities to assert themselves and act in new (and sometimes unexpected) ways. As one woman

described it, "When you are on the strike line, you can be very uninhibited." The women wrote songs and chants, many of which poked fun at management. Having endured insults to their "womanhood," they seized this opportunity to insult upper management's "manhood":

> There were women who came up with fantastic ideas. All the women got militant occasionally. From the youngest, single woman to the oldest, all got crazy occasionally... All the women got loud and rowdy, held up nasty signs, and said things they wouldn't usually say. I myself said something really nasty to the top manager when he bumped me with his car. I was shocked as were the other strikers. The managers' eyes bugged out when I insulted him. But all the other strikers laughed.

For some of the women, the strike provoked conflict. Several remembered their acute discomfort with the more "aggressive" aspects of the strike--in particular, with the insults yelled at management, the margarine spread over managers' cars, the eggs and tomatoes thrown at managers, and the glass spread across the driveway. One woman in her late fifties described her ambivalence over the strike:

> ...the strike was quite traumatic for many of the women. Several were not happy with picketing and did not want to picket but they did. I myself felt in very alien territory. I couldn't act as vociferously as the others.

A second older woman resolved her discomfort with the marching and screaming on the picket line by sitting off to one side in her lawn chair. She summed up her skepticism about the outcome of the strike by stating, "It's a man's world." Others of the women, both young and old, remembered discomfort with the violent activities which occurred on the picket line.

For others, their family situations proved a source of tension.

While the single women were free of the demands of husbands and children, their independence had a cost: There was noone to rely on if strike funds ran out or dismissals followed the strike. The single mothers were even more vulnerable: The strike threatened, not only their ability to provide for themselves, but also their ability to provide for their children. While the union promised strike funds for several weeks, one divorced mother who collected welfare to augment her minimal salary stressed the "high costs" of the strike. And in the case of married women, the reactions of husbands had a decisive influence on their experience of the strike. Some reported supportive spouses who totally endorsed the strike, increasing their household and childcare contributions to fill in where necessary. But for others, the strike caused significant strain in their marriages. The one woman interviewed who left the strike after the first week attributed her decision to family pressures:

> I had been raised in a management household and all of a sudden things were so confusing. My husband helped me decide to leave. With a new baby, it was hard. My husband said, 'You have to leave.'

For the rest of the women who stayed through the strike, many discussed the "emotional pressures" which resulted at home. Having just supported her husband through a two-month strike of his own, one woman described the unexpected and unsettling impact of the strike on her family life:

> My husband was fed up. I lived strike 24 hours a day and was gone a lot at meetings. My husband did much of the childcare, housework, and cooking. I was worried about my marriage but felt I couldn't give up the strike. I've never gone through anything so stressful in my life.

A second woman described in similar terms the tension which developed at home during the strike. Not a union man himself, this woman's husband kept asking when the strike would be over. Anxious about their mortgage, he told his wife that she would have to take a part-time job. She did, but with picketing and bargaining responsibilities, her marriage suffered.

Some of the women responded to their husbands with assertive claims about their right to participate in the strike. In response to her husband's demand that she quit the strike, one woman responded, "I don't care if you like it or not. I'm in this strike and will be until the end. Ard there isn't much you can do about it." And remembering the numerous times she had adapted her life to her husband's needs, a second woman asserted, "I didn't stand in your way when you moved me around the country and damn it to hell, don't you stand in my way now."

Whatever their family situations, the strike provided an opportunity for the union women to share their personal lives and develop close ties with coworkers. On warm days, women brought their children to the picket line, an act which, according to one woman, "management resented because it made them look bad." No longer segregated by department, the women formed strong friendships and commitments on the picket line:

> Before we were divided into upstairs and downstairs...[On strike], you got to know all sides of people. People shared their personal lives. You had to talk about something happy to distract you from the strike. You would talk about your kids and your husband.

While bargaining team members were not required to picket, one strike leader showed up every morning to boost morale. For her,

"the new friendships were the best part of the strike." Another woman expressed her friendship commitments even more strongly. "As the strike progressed," she recalled, "the issue became not only gaining a good contract but also protecting my friends."

The developing unity of the Trust women brought with it clear norms for strike participation. Each woman was expected to contribute her part and in some cases, disapproval was directed at those thought to be shirking their duties. One single mother whose childcare responsiblities prevented her from picketing regularly felt unsupported by other union members. For any woman who might have crossed the picket line and returned to work, more severe sanctions would have resulted. According to one of the strikers, "We would have killed her." One of the two women who left the strike near the beginning discovered the extent of her coworkers' resentment when she reapplied for her job after the strike. The union women made it sufficiently uncomfortable for her that she withdrew the application.

While the picket line helped to solidify the relationships among the union women, the management's strike behavior contributed to a heightened sense of "us" versus "them." During the first few weeks of the strike, the management bargaining team refused to bargain altogether. "They had the attitude," reported one woman, "that they would punish us bad little girls for striking." When they did agree to bargain, management responded to the union's demand for female representation at all bargaining sessions by calling in an

outside mediator. For many of the Trust women, management's actions reflected an attitude that, as one woman put it, "we were just a bunch of dumb little women who didn't know what we were doing." Such actions and attitudes contributed to the women's belief that management would go to great lengths to avoid recognizing the legitimacy of the union's demands.

The striking women faced other challenges as well. Publicity was a problem: The strike received little newspaper or television coverage.[6] Gaining support from other unions and community groups also proved difficult. While a few other labor unions--a local nurses union, AFSCME, and a teacher's union (Madison Teacher's Incorporated)--helped out on the picket line, extensive support from the community (from trade unionists or feminists) was not forthcoming. The union women felt that their own inexperience was partly responsible for the low level of support. But some of their initiatives revealed a sophisticated approach to strike strategy and politics.

The most unique tactic involved Jane Fonda in a ploy to inform the members of WEA about the situation at the Trust.[7] A month into the strike, the union women discovered that WEA had invited Jane Fonda as the key-note speaker for their yearly convention in Milwaukee. The Trust women contacted Fonda who agreed to incorporate into her speech a statement prepared by the strikers. Before 5000 teachers, Fonda concluded her speech by stating,

> And what if I told you that there are 53 women who work for an insurance company who, like Blacks in the days when they had to sit at the back of the buses, aren't allowed to walk in the front of the building and take an elevator to their offices. They have to come in a back door and walk up the back stairs. So little respect is given them by management that there is one supervisor assigned to every five clerical workers; that the supervisors follow them and time them even when are in the restrooms; follow them when they are off duty to be sure that their private time is spent the way the secretaries have said it was going to be spent; that these skilled workers, some of whom have worked for a long time as clericals, get as a starting pay $3.08 an hour...when half of these women support families by themselves? And what if I told you that they're your employees?

According to the union women, the president of WEA and the management of the Trust were furious. Fonda's comments were both unexpected and embarassing. But for the Trust women, the Fonda speech was a high point of the strike: It resulted in more publicity, increased support from WEA members, and perhaps most importantly, confirmation that the strike was a legitimate action.

In the last few weeks of the strike, the impasse in bargaining undermined the union's confidence that the strike would soon be resolved. Many of the women had anticipated a strike of several weeks duration, at the most. As the strike wore on and strike benefits expired,[8] several took part-time jobs. The majority of the women continued their picketing responsibilities but, as one woman described it, periods of demoralization set in:

> At times, we thought we should go back to work. People were getting on each other's backs and towards the end, we didn't feel united. It looked like management could win at times. But then, it would switch to the union side.

The bargaining team recognized that if the strike persisted into December, some of the union women might abandon the strike effort. They therefore recommended to the membership on November 23 that the union accept the contract proposed by the mediator.

The women agreed to the contract and returned to work on November 28. The contract embodied gains in the area of improved grievance language and strong union input into work rules and a significant loss in the elimination of the salary schedule. In management's view, the union had lost the strike. But in the estimation of many of the Trust women, the union had won the strike. To understand the women's assessment, we have to examine how the strike changed their attitudes about their employer, other workers, their families, and themselves.[9]

Changes in the Consciousness of the Trust Women

By enabling the women to challenge the restrictions of work and family, the strike resulted for many of the union women in greater self-confidence, outspokeness, and independence. Many gained an enhanced sense of their self-worth. One woman emphasized that "the strike taught me that I can be proud of myself for myself. I needn't apologize for lack of a label or because I'm 'only a housewife' or 'only a claims adjustor.'" And another stressed that "I will no longer be put down just because I'm a woman."

Many of the women expressed great pride in the collective accomplishments of the women during the strike. Underscoring that the strike changed her life, one woman stated,

> I feel really good about myself. Whenever anybody brings up anything about the strike, I feel really excited. I think, 'We really did something. WE, not I. It could never be an 'I' or 'me'. WE, WE, it has to be everybody. Without all of them, nobody could have done anything.

A second woman emphasized the satisfaction gained from successfully carrying off an "all women's action":

> The biggest thing I wanted [was] to show [that management was] cold and male chauvinist...And also just to show the people that we were women and we can do it. We didn't need men to help us. I was very proud to be part of it...being women and doing it on our own. And we put up a hell of a fight for so long!!!

For some of the women, their new-found independence translated into a more assertive stance in relation to their husbands. While also noting that she looked forward to spending more time with her family after the strike, one woman asserted that "my husband now knows that I will not back off if I feel strongly about something." When asked if her life felt back to normal, a second woman replied, "There is no returning to normal because I am a different person. I am less self-abnegating in relation to my family." A third woman emphasized her increased assertiveness in relation to her husband:

> [My assertiveness] has created some problems. I'm a lot more assertive and have a lot more outside interests like the women's movement. I'll say something when I think things aren't fair and my husband is used to my saying nothing.

The strongest statement of the changes the strike caused in her family life was offered by a fourth woman who reported that the strike transformed her from a "dutiful" wife into an independent woman:

> I realized after the strike that I don't have to wait on my husband because he is a man. If I'd had an experience like the strike at the beginning of my marriage, I would have made my husband see that he had to share the housework. I am now more independent from my husband. I won't wait on him or accept being put down as a woman...My new independence has caused a lot of stress in marriage. But I feel it is important to keep asserting myself.

Heightened feelings of individual self-worth were linked for many to a new commitment to standing up for their rights. Many of the women expressed a strong conviction that working women have the right to take action in the face of disrespectful working conditions. One woman emphasized that the strike taught her to stand up to management:

> Before the strike, I would have done whatever I was told, not thinking I had the right to say otherwise. Now, I do realize that...if you are not getting treated equally and fairly, you do have the right to say otherwise...I learned not to be afraid...(Before) I felt like I was stepping on pins and needles all the time...I learned I didn't have to take that anymore.

Echoing her coworker's feelings, a second woman expressed a similar conviction:

> At the strike's end, the union women felt proud of ourselves. We proved that we wouldn't take harassment, that we would take action if pushed around...I now recognize the power in numbers. I feel the strike will have a lasting impact on my future work life. I would stick up for my rights.

The strike left some of the women with a greater consciousness of the class distinctions between management and union personnel. One woman characterized her new awareness as follows:

> I now feel that my job is just as important as anyone else's. The Trust could probably get along without the supervisors but not without the people who do the actual work. It's very possible that the strike made me feel that all the jobs at the Trust are equally important.

And a second woman offered a similar critique of management's greater privileges:

> The supervisors and managers don't have to punch in and out, they receive pensions, and don't have to pay for coffee. They come and go when they want. They think they are better than we are. That is wrong. Union employees are the ones who help management get their paychecks.

The class consciousness of the union women was fused, for many, with a gender consciousness about the male-dominated hierarchy at the Trust. One woman attributed managerial behavior to sexist attitudes, "Management is always trying to make sure their employees know their place is one step below...The problem with the male managers is they are trained in the double standard." For a second woman, the managerial hierarchy at the Trust was inextricably bound up with patriarchy: "Management thinks that women are all lower class and that really hurts. I think this is a male-female issue. They treat them this way due to their attitudes about women." And, echoing the sentiments of her coworkers, a third woman underscored the "chauvinism" of male management:

> If there were more men as union employees, it would be harder for management to get away with things...Management would not expect men to take abuse. The management is very male chauvinistic and has the attitude that 'woman's place is in the home' and that if women's don't like the conditions at the Trust, they should leave. I disagree. Union women have the right to have a job and reach the top also.

From opposition to the patriarchal behavior and attitudes of Trust management, the women extended their experience to a greater identification with the organizing efforts of working women. Typical of their remarks was the statement by this woman who described the impact of the strike on her views about collective actions:

> Since the strike, I feel more supportive of other strikes. I don't pay that much attention to strikes though. I would feel differently if it was an all-women's strike. I discuss strikes with my girlfriends who have experienced strikes.

With one exception, all the women supported the nurses union in Madison (the United Professionals) which had come close to striking soon after the Trust action. As one bargaining team member put it, "I was even let down when the nurses didn't strike because I identified with the nurses strike as a women's struggle."

Greater ambivalence was expressed over support for the labor movement as a whole. Slightly less than half the women (45%) stated that they supported all labor unions and labor actions. The comments of this one woman typified their views:

> I am supportive of labor actions--of any strike. I supported the bus strike [by the Teamster's Union] in Madison. I don't think anybody would strike unless they were out to fight for what they wanted. I think that's right.

For the other 55%, their post-strike attitudes towards unions and labor actions were mixed: Several women felt that strikes were appropriate only under certain circumstances. One woman, for example, asserted that "there are jobs where people should not strike because a lot of people would be hurt." Another argued that

in the current economic crisis, workers should not strike over monetary demands.

Of the women who qualified their support for the labor movmement, the majority disapproved of "big labor"--of what they described as highly-paid, male labor unions. Some women felt that the demands of unions such as the Teamster's Union and the United Auto Workers contributed to inflation and gave "small unions like the United Staff Union a bad name." When asked if she supported the 1980 Teamster's bus strike in Madison, one woman replied,

> I wasn't opposed to the strike but I couldn't help but compare it to our strike at the Trust. For example, when you compare wages, you can't help but conclude that the busdrivers are better paid because busdriving is a male occupation. I also felt some envy for all the publicity they received.

A second woman expressed stronger criticisms of the Teamster's bus strike:

> I felt critical of the bus strike. I was not supportive of their wage demands. I just cannot support a union on strike for a 20% wage increase. I would feel happy with the wages those workers have now. I felt they were out of line.

And a third women stated the strongest criticisms of both the Teamster's strike and "big labor":

> I was not crazy about unions when I started at the Trust and I am not crazy about them now. A union is needed at places like the Trust. In general, unions were very helpful when they first started. In the last fifteen to twenty years, unions have created problems in the economy with their wage demands. I would like unions more if money weren't always the primary issue. If the UAW hadn't constantly demanded higher wages, they might not be accepting cutbacks now. I went out on strike for the working conditions, not the money...I did not support the bus drivers.

Among those women who criticized "big labor", some were inconsistent in their views. One woman who argued that certain unions shouldn't strike later qualified her statement:

> With the economy the way it is, the union is probably the best thing the Trust women have going for them...There are a lot of people critical of unions but there are also a lot of people out of work. If they had been in a union when the business closed, they might have received some compensation.

And having contrasted "good" with "bad" unions, a second woman voiced support for both the local Teamster's strike and the national Patco strike.

What is the explanation for the ambivalent feelings of the Trust women towards labor unions? The consciousness of working women--like that of working men--is often inconsistent and contradictory, combining elements of the dominant belief system and an (explicit or implicit) critique of that system.[10] Mann has suggested that workers are more likely to express oppositional values in areas that reflect their direct experience (e.g. in relation to their own workplace) and hegemonic values in areas more distant from their own experience (e.g. in relation to the "capitalist system.")[11] For the Trust women, the direct experience of the strike provided the basis for a strong identification with working women's struggles. Support for the "labor movement as a whole" required a more abstract commitment.

This framework provides an explanation for the variation among the women in support for the labor movement. Of the ten women who expressed unambivalent support for unions, 80% came from backgrounds where their father, their husband, or they themselves had belonged to a union. Through their family networks, these women had access to pro-union attitudes and values. Previous contact with unions, however, did not translate into consistent support for the labor movement. Of the twelve women who expressed reservations about trade unions, 42% came from union backgrounds. This suggests that while indirect contact with labor unions through family

members facilitated a pro-union identification, it was often insufficient to counter the dominant media (mis)representation of the labor movement.

There is a second interpretation of the Trust women's views about the labor movement. For many of the women, the central characteristic distinguishing "good" from "bad" unions was the gender of their membership. Most of the women indicated support for small unions representing lowly-paid, female workers and criticisms of large unions representing highly-paid male workers. From their encounters with the male domination of the professionals over the United Staff Union, the Trust women had direct experience with gender hierarchy in the labor movement. The distinction drawn between "male" and "female" unions may have reflected, in part, an extension of their own experience to a critique of sexism within the labor movement as a whole.[12]

Conclusion

The analysis of the strike at the Trust suggests the complex meanings and consequences of women's involvement in collective action. First, the analysis points to conflict as an important aspect of women's relationship to work and family. The focus on conflict reveals the ways in which these clericals were actors attempting to gain control and self-respect, rather than passive objects of managerial strategies and familial constraints. Faced with working conditions defined by patriarchal management attitudes, as well as a hierarchy of surveillance and control, the women at the Trust responded by initiating a strike action. For many of the women, the strike was not easy. It required that the single mothers risk financial hardship, that the married women challenge traditional power relationships with their husbands, and that all the women confront conventional expectations about proper feminine behavior. While these pressures caused a significant level

of discomfort for some of the women, for all but a few, misgivings were overidden by a commitment to "seeing the strike through."

Second, the analysis highlights how closely participation in oppositional actions and critical consciousness are linked. The process of participating in the strike led to the solidification of the women's relationships and a growth in their critical consciousness. By taking action, the women at the Trust promoted further thought. Shared sensibilities about rights and goals, only partially formed until the collective action promoted further understanding, were forged on the picket line.[13] The central element of this "shared sensibility" was a consciousness of working women's rights. From opposition to the patriarchal behavior and attitudes of the Trust management, many of the women extended their experience to a greater identification with feminist issues and the working women's movement.

But as dramatic as the strike was, it would be a mistake to misinterpret the conclusions which the Trust women took away from their experience. Like other participants in collective action, the union women incorporated the lessons of the strike into pre-existing ideas about work and family. Based on their encounters with managerial sexism and harassment, the union women developed a particular interpretation of working women's rights--the right to oppose blatantly discriminatory management practices and demand respectful treatment on the job. For many of the women, their consciousness of work-based rights did not extend to a more general identification with the labor movement (or the women's movement.) It is important to address the ways in which this particular consciousness of "working women's rights" may be insufficient to challenge more sophisticated managerial initiatives and strategies.

Managers have available to them a wide array of strategies to control their workforce. If derogatory comments and surveillance tactics provoke organized resistance, managers can implement a "human relations" approach, they can deploy computerized technologies, or they can institute internal labor markets to fragment women's work culture and quiet dissent.[14] In the face of such managerial initiatives, office workers need a conception of "rights" which includes rights of control over the technological and social organization of work.

One might draw the conclusion from this analysis that office workers initiate collective actions only in the face of blatantly coercive, disrespectful, and sexist working conditions. Such a conclusion would sell short the experience of the women who partipated in the strike at the Trust. In many ways, the strategies of the Trust women reflected both the extent and the limits of the women's movement. It is partially because feminists have validated women's right to protest disrespectful and discriminatory working conditions that the Trust women were able to mobilize for this strike. But the working women's movement is still in its infancy. If office workers like the women at the Trust are to translate their consciousness of "working women's rights" into more far-reaching organizing strategies, they require a strengthened working women's movement capable of providing the institutional support, the financial resources, and the ideology to underwrite such efforts.[15]

NOTES

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1 Louise A. Tilly, "Paths of Proletarianization: Organization of Production, Sexual Divisions of Labor, and Women's Collective Action," SIGNS 7, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 400-417.

2 Thomas Dublin, Women At Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1820-1860 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979)

3 Sarah Eisenstein, Give Us Bread But Give Us Roses Too (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983)

4 Most of the data for this paper was derived from 6 semi-structured interviews with managers at the Trust; 22 in-depth oral history interviews with women who participated in the strike; and 37 short written interviews of strike participants. The interviews with managers included questions on managerial policies, decisions, and attitudes; specific managerial responsibilities; and the strike. Every woman who was on strike was asked to participate in the oral history interviews. Because several of the women who refused were known to be more critical of the strike, there is some selection bias in the interviews. The oral history interviews were semi-structured and covered the following topics: work and family history, union background, work and family attitudes, working conditions at the Trust, the strike, and post-strike working conditions. The oral histories took on the average from two to four hours. All the interviews were taped and abstracted (into detailed outlines rather than transcriptions.) The short written interviews included demographic questions, as well as questions on work and family history, union background, and extent of strike participation. Additional materials for this paper--union newsletters, grievances, and labor contracts--were provided by the union. Only a small part of the information from the written and oral interviews is included in this paper.

The analysis of the interview data was primarily qualitative. The objective was to uncover patterns in the women's experiences, rather than to test hypotheses. See Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

5
There is no way to objectively assess what Trust managers actually said. Throughout the interviews, the union women referred to comments and attitudes of the top managers which they found particularly frustrating. For the purposes of this paper, the determination of the accuracy of managerial statements is less important than the shared understandings of the union women about those statements. If several of the women referred to a particular incident, I determined that that incident was salient for their developing work culture.

6
Two years before the strike, a bitter strike had taken place at the major Madison newspapers (owned by Madison Newspaper Incorporated.) This may partially explain the low level of newspaper coverage for the Trust strike, although the fact that it was a women's strike may also have been a factor.

7
The Trust women reported that up until this time, they received uneven reponses from teachers: Some teachers supported the strike, others ignored it.

8
Strike benefits of $100 a week were provided for the first four weeks of the strike. After that time, low-interest loans were available through the union.

9
To objectively measure the impact of the strike on the women's consciousness, one would need to conduct two interviews, one before the strike and the other after the strike. Since all the interviews were collected after the strike, I have only one measure. While this measure is biased as an indicator of objective changes in consciousness, it is an accurate measure of the women's perceptions of the changes.

10
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11
Michael Mann, Consciousness and Action Among the Western Working Class (London: Humanities, 1975)

12 For historical analyses of sexual hierarchy within the labor movement, see Alice Kessler-Harris, "Where Are the Organized Women Workers?" in A Heritage of Her Own, ed. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster) pp. 343-366, Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," in Capitalism, Patriarchy, and the Case for Socialist Feminism, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press), pp. 206-247, and Ruth Milkman, "Organizing the Sexual Division of Labor: Historical Perspectives on Women's Work and the American Labor Movement," Socialist Review 10, no. 1, (January-February 1980): 95-150. For research which specifically examines the ambivalent relationship of labor unions to female clerical workers, see Sharon Hartman Strom, "Challenging 'Woman's Place': Feminism, the Left, and Industrial Unionism in the 1930's," Feminist Studies 9, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 359-386 and Roslyn L. Feldberg, "'Union Fever': Organizing Among Clerical Workers, 1900-1930," Radical America 14 (May-June 1980): 53-67.

13 See Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," SIGNS 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 545-566.

14 See Richard Edwards, Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century (New York: Basic Books, 1979) for a discussion of the use of internal labor markets as a managerial strategy of control. See also Andrew Herman, "Conceptualizing Control: Domination and Hegemony in the Capitalist Labor Process," Insurgent Sociologist 11, no. 3 (Fall, 1982): 7-22 for an analysis of human relations strategies in the workplace. For analyses of managerial strategies in the office workplace--from Taylorism to office automation--see C. Wright Mills, White Collar (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Roslyn L. Feldberg, "Proletarianizing Clerical Work: Technology and Organizational Control in the Office," in Case Studies in the Labor Process, ed. Andrew Zimbalist (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), pp. 51-72, Maureen De Kadt, "Insurance: A Clerical Work Factory," in Zimbalist, pp. 242-256, Jane Barker and Hazel Downing, "Word Processing and the Transformation of the Patriarchal Relations of Control in the Office," Capital and Class 10 (Spring 1980): 64-97, Anne Machung, "Word Processing: Forward for Business, Backwards For Women," forthcoming in Women's Toils and Triumphs at the Workplace, ed. Karen Sacks and Dorothy Remy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984), Mary C. Murpree, "Office Technology: The Changing World of the Legal Secretary," forthcoming in Women's Toils and Triumphs at the Workplace, Judith Gregory, "Technological Change in the Office Workplace and Implications for Organzing," Labor and Technology: Union Responses to Changing Environments, ed. Donald Kennedy, Charles Craypo, Mary Lehman (Penn. State University, 1982), pp. 83-102, Margaret Lowe Benston, "For Women, The Chips Are Down," The Technological Woman: Interfacing With Tomorrow, ed. Jan Zimmerman (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 44-53, and Mike Duncan, "Microelectronics: Five Areas of Subordination," Science, Technology, and the Labor Process, ed. Les Levidon and Bob Young (London: CSE Books, 1981).

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